Young Miles

Author's Afterword

The Warriors Apprentice was my second novel. I began it in the fall of 1983, just six or so weeks after sending the manuscript of my first novel, eventually named Shards of Honor, off to a New York publisher, in blind hope and without a literary agent, in what is called, variously for unpublished writers, "on spec(ulation)," "over the transom" or "into the slushpile." The character of Miles Naismith Vorkosigan was a gleam in my eye when I began the story of his parents in that first book; by the time I had finished it, he'd already begun to take more substantial form. In the beginning I knew only three things about Miles: he was born crippled in a militaristic society, he was very bright, and he was extremely energetic. Since one of my own chronic complaints is that I never have enough energy, this last aspect of his character can legitimately be classified as author's wish-fulfillment fantasy.

Miles's first name was stolen from the character of Miles Hendron, in Mark Twain's The Prince and the Pauper. I was at the time innocent of the fact that "miles" means "soldier" in Latin, but I'll bet Twain wasn't. Miles's vaguely posited physical handicaps acquired a real-life template from a certain hospital pharmacist I used to work with; the height, the hunch, the head, the chin-tic and the leg braces were all lifted from this brilliant man. I took at least one of Miles's subtler

psychological qualities from T.E. Lawrence. Lawrence had to a marked degree what one of his more prominent biographers, John Mack, described as a power of "enablement"; somehow, people around him in many different contexts found themselves doing more and better for the strength of his example and encouragement than they might have on their own. On a still deeper level of characterization, Miles's "great man's son syndrome," the fountain of so much of his drive and therefore my plots, owes much to my relationship with my own father. It is a curious comment on our culture that this particular psychological profile, which to my observation appears in both genders, is never called a "great man's daughter's syndrome." I wish that were only an artifact of the power of alliteration.

By the time I'd finished Shards I'd also developed the much more unexpected character of Konstantine Bothari. Bothari and Miles were a magnetic pairing. The very first image I had for the book that eventually became The Warrior's Apprentice was the death of Bothari, initially visualized defending Miles from some yet-to-be-conceived enemy on a shuttleport tarmac, far from home. The subsequent challenge to Miles, to survive without Bothari's quasi-parental support, was inherent in that initial vision. So while the book was written, largely, from beginning to end (a method I'd learned to prefer while writing Shards), it was generated from the inside out. I've described my usual writing process as scrambling from peak to peak of inspiration through foggy valleys of despised logic. Inspiration is better —when you can get it.

I began Warrior's exactly where it starts now; I made very few revisions to that first scene later. In the very first draft, however, Miles had a younger sister. Elena Bothari was originally named Nile, after the character of Nile Etland in a couple of James H. Schmitz stories I'd read back in Analog magazine in the '60s. The sister was deleted before I got to Chapter 3, as I realized she and Elena/Nile occupied the same ecological niche. Test readers eventually convinced me that the name Nile for my heroine and Miles for my hero would be a copy-editor's nightmare later, if I ever achieved publication, so I regretfully gave up the name. Elena was never quite the same after the change, though. I'm still saving the name Nile.

Over the years I've found my book titles sometimes appear simultaneously with their book ideas, sometimes partway through, and sometimes, worst of all, never—books arrive at publication still sporting some dippy working title which then must be hastily changed. I've had two or three different books with the working title of Miles to Go over the years. The Warrior's Apprentice, happily, is one of the first and best category. It is, of course, a pun on the old folk tale "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," so title, plot, and theme were all there from the first.

So I had set myself a comic plot structure with a tragedy at the heart of its maze. How many screwball comedies have the sequence of the little white lie that grows and grows out of hand? It was also, I discovered shortly, a theological romance, since sequence by sequence Miles was challenged by his then-three besetting sins: pride, imprudence, and despair. With these maps and compasses to guide me through the foggy valleys, I began writing my way to the shifting center.

Writing Warrior's also taught me some important lessons about how to both use and ignore critique. I have some strong ideas about the importance of the reader in the story process. I've always used test-readers; I write to communicate a vision, and I always like to check and try to see if the message-received sufficiently resembles the message-sent. I twice earnestly re-wrote my way down wrong turns, when two trusted professional-level critiquers made suggestions which, in both cases, would have been fatal to the book and the series that eventually followed it. One, under the impression that I was writing standard commercial space opera, suggested I get rid of the entire opening sequence, including Miles's grandfather, and "start with the action" of the Beta Colony encounters; another had for personal reasons a view of the character of Bothari that was utterly hostile, and wanted a different version of his death. Trying to be a good little reviser, I finished these, sat back, and twitched for days. Then tore them both out and put back my first visions.

The fundamental substance of a book, if you are writing a real book, in your own blood, is not optional. The thematic vision often cannot be communicated—or even realized, if (as in my own case) the writing itself is a process of self-discovery—in partial sections. The whole must be present to become greater than the sum of the parts. Test readers, however useful in some areas (spelling! grammar! continuity! O please yes!) can become a hazard when they begin, on the basis of incomplete information, trying in all good faith to help you to write some other book than the one you intend. For example, the death of Miles's grandfather was based in a very oblique way on the death of one of my own grandfathers; cutting that sequence felt like chopping off my arm for very good reasons. Zelazny's dictum, "Trust your demon," meaning, follow your own inner vision, eventually became a mantra for me.

Once past the center, the book went more quickly. Even the return of Shards rejected from its first submission couldn't stop Miles's forward momentum by that time. I created Warriors final submission draft in the fall of 1984, turned back to an edit of Shards based on some editorial comments in its rejection letter (all of two sentences), and then began Ethan of Athos.

Seven months later Warrior's was returned unread from its first

submission, because they'd decided not to take the revised Shards and didn't want to break up the set. This was devastating at the time, but I was in fact grateful later. An editor at a second publisher read the first fifty pages, decided it was a juvenile, and kindly suggested I try a Young Adult publisher.

The YA publisher disagreed with this evaluation; the book was bounced with a form rejection. (I don't know what percentage of it they read.) It was now late summer of 1985. My writer-friend Lillian Carl suggested I try it on Betsy Mitchell at a new publisher called Baen Books, because she'd met Betsy on the science fiction convention circuit, and thought she might give it a good read and, at the very least, a more useful and informative rejection letter than the cryptic ones I'd got so far. So I did.

I never got the useful rejection letter, though. In August the book passed the first reader, in September it passed Betsy, and in mid-October Jim Baen telephoned me and offered for all three completed books, two of which he had not yet seen. My God, I thought, after I stopped hyperventilating, a publisher that operates in real time! (Warning to aspiring writers: this was twelve years ago now. Baen's slush piles were much smaller then.)

I then began Falling Free, as a conscious attempt at a "more serious" form of SF than Miles's "space opera." (I care much less about such labels nowadays.) By chance, during a pause in the middle of it, Betsy at Baen called me up and invited me to contribute a Miles story to an anthology of mercenary novellas she was editing, as a result of which I wrote "The Borders of Infinity." I finished Falling Free, then went on to write Brothers in Arms.

Miles's potential as a series character was acquiring a serious kinetic wallop by this time. I was conscious that I was a rather slow writer by commercial standards. Both because I had very much enjoyed the novella form, and because it would allow me to produce a book in two-thirds my usual time, I'd suggested as part of my next three-book contract to recycle the "Borders" tale and add two more novellas to it, making an all-Miles volume. So I wrote "The Mountains of Mourning" next, followed by "Labyrinth," incidentally establishing a pattern of writing at will anywhere in Miles's timeline, and accidentally setting up the subsequent perpetual readerly argument of whether it is better to read the Miles stories in publication order or by internal chronology. In these omnibus volumes you are getting them by internal chronology, by the way—until I wreck the nice arrangement by writing another prequel someday.

I can name where many of the elements of "Mountains" came from; Fat Ninny was based on a real horse, and I share Miles's love of the semi-wild country. Ma Mattulich was an extreme version of a certain female type I knew from real life, both victim and enforcer of her

culture's life-denying mores. The river of roses might seem to have wandered in from some fairy-tale, sign and signifier of transformations to come, but I have met those wild roses in person, in banked-up masses, while riding in the Ohio fields of my childhood. I borrowed the title from a friend's working title of a fantasy, The Mountains of Morning, that she didn't use for her story's final version. "Mountains" was a contrary story, based on the "What's the worst possible thing we can do to this guy?" plot-generator, taking my new-minted Ensign Miles, his face to the stars, and forcing his head around to take a look at what his feet were planted in. At the time I was having an amiable debate with Jim Baen whether the series should be called "Miles Naismith Adventures" or "Miles Vorkosigan Adventures"; "Mountains" was in some degree the last word in this argument. It won me my first Hugo award, and my second Nebula, for best novella of 1989.

The third book in my three-book contract had been sold on what I fancied was the world's shortest synopsis: one word, "Quaddies." I really had intended when I'd finished Falling Free to write its sequel, but when I came to it, I still was not ready. (I am now even less ready.) It was very apparent, though, looking at the Miles tales I'd already written, that there was an important gap between "Mountains" and "Labyrinth." I knew how Miles had left the Dendarii Mercenaries, but I didn't know how he'd got back to them. I did know it couldn't have been simple. A lot must have happened in the three years Miles was tied down in military school, and such responsibility and respect weren't the sort of thing the military powers-that-be on Barrayar were likely to voluntarily give to the young ensign we'd last seen in "Mountains." Jim Baen meanwhile had primed the pump by sending me a copy of B.H. Liddell-Hart's Strategy, which I read primarily because Captain Liddell-Hart had also been an admirer of Lawrence in his day. Ah, connections.

As long as my novels of character were being packaged as military SF anyway, I figured I might as well take a whack at the sub-genre more nearly head-on. So I set out to make the book which became The Vor Game as military as I could, as a sort of delayed present to Jim for raising me out of the slush-gutter back in '85. Unusually, I can describe exactly the moment at which the ideas came together in my head for the book's opening sequence. I was standing at my kitchen sink doing the dinner dishes, and listening to an Enya tape which contained a song sung in Latin titled "Cursum Perficio." What the actual lyrics of the song may be about I have no clue, but somehow its rhythms sounded both military and ecclesiastical to me, and I was put in mind of an early Christian martyr tale I'd once run across called "The Forty Martyrs of Sebastiani." The fast-forward version of this goes: a certain Roman legion was wintering in Dacia, up beyond the Black Sea, at a period when the high command was flip-flopping over the acceptability

of this new religion. Orders came down for the Christians to recant. Forty men refused, and were ordered to stand out naked on the ice of a frozen lake until they changed their minds. Only one man broke. A watching Roman officer was so impressed with their fortitude, he went out to join them, to make up their round lot again, and they all froze to death. It seemed a very Barrayaran sort of tale to me, somehow.

I had also read T.E. Lawrence's The Mint, an account of his basic training when he re-enlisted in the British Army after World War I, under a pseudonym, as an enlisted man. Now, admittedly ex-Colonel Lawrence was not in the best psychological shape at this point in his life, but the account was nonetheless relentless in its description of the brutality and banality of training camp life.

Hanging on the wall of my father's home office for years, and now on mine, was a print titled "Alaskan Outpost," an almost art-deco stylized scene of an arctic weather station, with a parka-clad man out collecting data from his instruments, a snow-covered glacier sliding down the mountain in the background. It was a gift dated 1952 from his colleagues at the Battelle Memorial Research Institute, where he worked as a physicist and engineer till moving to his teaching post at the Ohio State University. In addition to his research and teaching, my father moonlighted as the second television weatherman in the United States, at Channel 10 Columbus, Ohio; most of the many Central Ohioans who knew him as "Bob McMaster, TV Weatherman," had no idea of his professorial day job. When the show first appeared, the weather segment used to be fifteen minutes long and he would always get in a short meteorology lesson as well as the forecast. He was so good, the Strategic Air Command pilots at Lockbourne Air Force Base used to call him up for pre-flight weather reports, in preference to their less reliable military weather sources, till their command caught up with them and made them stop.

So somehow, between one dish and the next, Enya; The Mint, "Alaskan Outpost," Strategy, the Forty Martyrs, and Miles all crashed together in my head, and came out the opening section of The Vor Game. Boom. The rest was mere logic, fine-tuning the connections.

I had set out to return Miles to the Dendarii fleet, but when that blasted dead body turned up in the drain in Chapter 3, the book tried very hard to turn into a military murder-mystery of some kind, set wholly on Kyril Island. The packet Miles retrieved had originally contained money, which had my test-readers jumping up and down in anticipation of all sorts of chicanery; I finally had to transmute the contents to cookies, dammit, cookies, to get them to shut up about it. For the information of those who worry about such things, The Vor Game was not an extension or continuation of the novella version, "Weatherman"; the novella segment was the original planned front end, cut off and cycled over to Analog magazine for some welcome

extra cash and exposure. There is nevertheless a shift in tone between the two sections of the tale, between the darker The Mint-influenced opening and the rather, er, sunnier later Strategy-inspired sections which leads me to sometimes regret not splitting it into two separate novels. But The Vor Game went on to win me my second Hugo, my first for Best Novel, so I would hardly dare mess with it now.

And oh, Enya gets in her bit at the end of the book as well, for balance; for reasons only known to my back-brain, the triumphant arrival of the Prince Serg in the wormhole battle has for its associated music "Cu Chulainn," an instrumental piece from her self-titled album.

The stories in Young Miles are not as closely connected as those in its companion omnibus volume Cordelia's Honor, whose components Shards of Honor and Barrayar are truly two halves of one book. But the three pieces assembled here are held together by more than just chronology and the glue on the spine. Together, they form the story of Miles as an apprentice adult, from his naive beginnings to a solidly forged journeyman's place in his world. My favorite literary pattern is the spiral, where we come back around to where we started, but on a much higher plane and with a profoundly different perspective. Miles's time of true and tempered mastery will come later, as he discovers with age that "the questions are the same, but the answers change"—and that sometimes, that corkscrew line from beginning to end is a powder train.